

ANNIE'S MAILBOX

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CHANGING DIET CHANGES RELATIONSHIP

Dear Annie: Last weekend, I got a text from my dad that said: "I'm going vegan LOL." (Yes, he says "LOL." He's hip like that.) I laughed and brushed it aside, but during dinner last night, he and my stepmom told me they are serious about it. It definitely took me by surprise, but I was supportive and excited about the idea, so much so that I even went with him to Barnes & Noble to pick out an awesome vegan cookbook. But since then, I've been having a strangely emotional reaction to his decision.

We love to eat. That's our "thing." We go out to dinner, try new, unusual cuisines and eat our way through new cities when traveling. He even seriously considered taking a leave from work to audition for a Food Network show. Some of my best memories involve meals we've shared. And now what? I'll order sashimi, and he'll have ... seaweed? I have no issue with the decision itself; I've done every juice cleanse and 30-day challenge under the sun -- and I love me some seaweed. I actually find the choice quite admirable.

What I realized is that the child in me is afraid that a piece of our relationship will be lost. Through my parents' (nasty) divorce, no matter how things were between them or between us -- no matter when new people came into the picture and old people left -- whenever we sat down at the table, all of the yuckiness melted away. This feels like one more thread of consistency and connection being cut.

Are there any actions you suggest I take to move forward? -- Herbivore Dilemma

Dear Herbivore Dilemma: You are clearly a thoughtful person to have such insight into your emotions and their roots. Perhaps this is the opportunity you've needed to express some long-held feelings. Talking through these concerns will bring you closer than ever. And with time, you'll find out that it was never about the food; it was about sitting down together.

Dear Annie: I have a weird question for you. I live in a Midwestern community that has expensive water and sewer costs. I also exercise every day, and as a result, I drink a lot of water -- and I mean a lot of water. So when my wife is not home, I urinate in the bathroom sink. Then I wash my hands, which rinses the sink basin at the same time. This uses a fraction of the water that flushing the toilet would use. Multiply that by dozens of times a day and the savings are significant. Urine is sterile; the sink gets washed out afterward; and my hands are clean. What are your thoughts on my actions? -- Sink Secret

Dear Sink Secret: I think you ought to knock it off. For one, urine isn't sterile; that's just a myth. For another, if you're really bent on saving water, there are plenty of ways to do so -- such as installing a low-flush toilet -- that don't require lying to your wife.

ASK THE DOCTORS

Got questions? Send them to: askthedoctors@mednet.ucla.edu

AGE-RELATED LOSS OF TASTE AND SMELL NOT UNCOMMON

Dear Doctor: Does loss of taste occur naturally with old age, or could it be a symptom of an illness? I'm 89, in pretty good shape with good blood pressure, but seem to be losing my sense of taste.

Dear Reader: While it's true than an impaired sense of taste can be related to illnesses that range from a simple cold to a complex neurological disorder, by the time one is 89 (congratulations, by the way!) it's more likely that the decline is age-related. To understand why, we need to talk about two of our senses -- taste and smell.

Let's begin with a tiny and amazing organ -- the taste bud. We enter the world with about 10,000 taste buds, each of which is made up of between 10 and 50 sensory cells. These cells are bundled together like the sections of an orange, and are connected to a complex web of nerve fibers.

Each bundle is tipped with a fluid-filled pore that behaves as a funnel and, via minute fibers known as taste hairs, delivers molecules to the sensory cells to be "tasted." The nerve fibers send chemical messages from the taste buds to the brain, where they are interpreted as sweet, salty, bitter, sour and savory, also referred to as "umami."

The taste buds themselves are tucked into undulating walls and grooves on the surface of the tongue, which are known as papillae. The papillae greatly increase the surface area of the tongue. This allows for a significant increase in sensitivity without a corresponding increase in the size of the tongue. Additional tasting cells are found on the roof of the mouth and along the lining of the throat.

As you may have noticed, we recover from a bite or burn to the tongue far more quickly than to other parts of the body. This is due to the remarkable rate at which the sensory cells in the taste buds can regenerate. As we age, though, these cells tend to regenerate more slowly. This affects our sense of taste.

At the same time, our sense of smell, which plays a crucial role in our ability to taste and distinguish the subtleties of flavors, also begins to diminish. When we chew, volatile molecules travel via the nasal cavity from the mouth to the nose. There, as on the tongue, highly specialized cells send signals to the brain, where the incoming data get interpreted as flavor.

Research shows that what is perceived as a loss in the sense of taste is, in fact, often a loss in the sense of smell. The tongue will tell us that something is sweet. But it's the sense of smell allows us to say whether that sweet bite is a peach or an apricot.

A diminished sense of smell has many causes. If the decline in your ability to taste is sudden or severe, a visit to your primary care physician is a good idea. He or she can perform tests to assess the degree of the loss, conduct a physical exam to rule out chronic conditions or disease, and propose medical treatment, if appropriate.

ASTROGRAPH

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 23-Dec. 21) -- Move things around at home to suit your current situation. Visitors or guests will appreciate your hospitality and want to return the favor in whatever way possible. Personal growth is encouraged.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19) -- Look at the possibilities that are within reach, and hone in on what it is you want to accomplish before the year comes to a close. Set realistic goals.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 19) -- Emotions will surface, making it difficult for you to make a decision. Don't let anger or remorse dictate how you deal with others. Do what's best for you.

PISCES (Feb. 20-March 20) -- A change of heart will disrupt your plans. Try not to show disappointment. If you carry on, you will be surprised by the outcome. An opportunity will come your way.

ARIES (March 21-April 19) -- A personal change can be made. You'll feel good about the way you look and feel if you choose a healthy lifestyle and project self-confidence. Romance is heightened.

TAURUS (April 20-May 20) -- You'll face opposition if you are physically, emotionally or financially excessive. Consider the consequences and show more discipline in the way you live, act and spend. Avoid people who are bad influences.

GEMINI (May 21-June 20) -- Don't take on responsibilities that don't belong to you. Too much of anything will leave you in a vulnerable position. Aim to please, but stay within your budget.

CANCER (June 21-July 22) -- Don't be fooled by a smooth talker. When it comes to handling your money and personal affairs, you need to take charge. Use your imagination to find a workable solution.

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22) -- Take care of your responsibilities or someone will complain. You can have fun after you take care of business. A personal change will lead to compliments and an affectionate encounter.

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22) -- Keep your eye on the ball. Don't let emotions drag you off-course. It's important to search for truth and to make your decisions based on facts, not on assumptions.

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 23) -- Taking on too much will make you anxious. You are best off revisiting your to-do list and finding a way to cut back. A realistic assessment will help you make fewer unrealistic promises.

SCORPIO (Oct. 24-Nov. 22) -- Don't let your emotions take control when dealing with friends or relatives. You may not agree with everyone, but diplomacy should be implemented in the spirit of the season.

CROSSWORD PUZZLE

Want more puzzles? Check out the "Just Right Crossword Puzzles" books at QuillDriverBooks.com

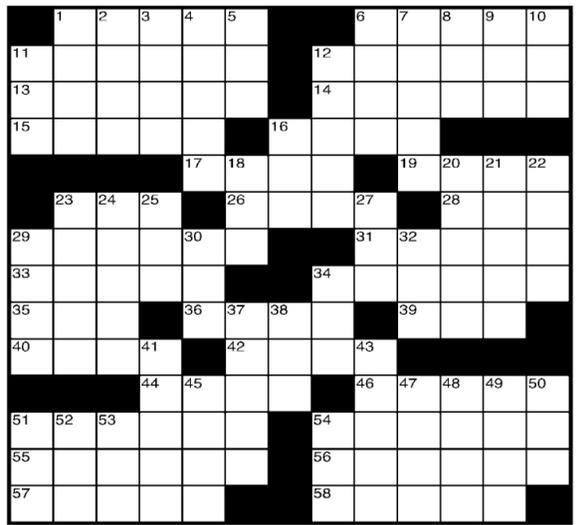
- ACROSS 1 Grant's bill 6 Mushroom 11 "Bus Stop" blonde 12 Barrier 13 Familiarize 14 Largest state 15 Ms. LaBelle 16 Itemized statement 17 Converse 19 Weary sound 23 Audi rival 26 "La Traviata" highlight 28 Hairy insect 29 Inquisitive 31 Sad sack 33 Sword thrust 34 Williams of tennis 35 Actress -- Hagen 36 Greenish-blue 39 Genetic ltrs. 40 Butte kin 42 Footed vases 44 Donkey pin-on 46 Snug

Answer to Previous Puzzle



- DOWN 1 Roman market-places 2 No future -- 3 Stew over 4 Bar mixer 5 Even so 6 Reflect 7 Unwritten tests 8 Hwys. 9 Wapiti 10 Actress -- Thompson 11 Swab the deck 12 Half of Hispaniola 16 Block 18 Broom rider 20 "Ghosts" writer 21 Actress Davis

- 51 Commu- cate 54 Maraud 55 Kingdoms 56 South American river 57 Venture forth 58 Verne of sci-fi 22 Juno, in Athens 23 Beast 24 Chatty pets 25 Disguise item 27 Malt beverage 29 Pudding fruit 30 Teachers' org. 32 Law (abbr.) 34 Japanese honorific 37 Ceases 38 Home page addr. 41 To any degree (2 wds.) 43 Famed orca 45 Ant horde 47 Track shape 48 Labyrinth 49 Swelled heads 50 Longing 51 Returns org. 52 Drop -- line 53 Crony 54 British rule in India



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